

BOSTON GLOBE
7 November 1985

President says agent's return possibly a ploy

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WASHINGTON - President Reagan yesterday said the Vitaly Yurchenko affair - in which a senior KGB official defected to the West, then denounced the CIA and returned yesterday to the Soviet Union - "might have been a deliberate ploy" planned by Moscow.

[A Canadian television network reported yesterday that authorities were investigating a possible connection between a Soviet woman's suicide in Toronto and Yurchenko's return to the Soviet Union. Page 16.]

In an interview with news wire services, Reagan noted that the Yurchenko episode coincided with two recent similar cases - that of Miroslav Medvid, a Soviet sailor who jumped ship in New Orleans but then decided to return, and that of Vasilyech Sukhanov, a Soviet soldier who defected to the US Embassy in Afghanistan but then said he wanted to go back home.

"I have to say that this coming as they do together, these three particular incidents, you can't rule out the possibility that this might have been a deliberate ploy, a maneuver," said Reagan.

Reagan volunteered the view that the three incidents were linked when he was asked a related but separate question about whether he had ordered an investigation into the Yurchenko episode.

He did not explicitly endorse the theory that the three incidents together constituted a Soviet ploy. "There's no way that you can prove that it isn't so. On the other hand, there's no way you can prove that it is," he said.

Reagan said, "You can't rule out personal desire, homesickness, whatever it might be" as other possible motives for the defectors' behavior.

However, he added, "I think it's awfully easy for any American to be perplexed by anyone that could live in the United States and would prefer to live in Russia."

Yurchenko, who claimed in a dramatic news conference at the Soviet Embassy Monday that he had not defected but instead been kidnapped and tortured by the CIA, left the United States just before 5 p.m. yesterday.

He departed aboard the same Soviet airliner that shortly after noon brought Soviet ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin back from pre-summit talks in Moscow.

Accompanied by about 20 other Soviets, Yurchenko walked briskly from a van at Dulles International Airport near Washington to the plane. He paused briefly and waved to reporters, but said nothing.

Yurchenko, dressed in a beige raincoat, was given two bouquets of roses by Soviet Embassy officials, a presentation one official called a Soviet custom for departures.

An embassy official said Yurchenko was "very happy" to be going home.

Three US government officials briefly boarded the plane and left a few minutes later.

Yurchenko, until recently the 5th highest-ranking official in the Soviet KGB, defected to the US Embassy in Rome in July. In September, he reportedly revealed details about Soviet spying to the CIA, and was heralded as a great intelligence asset.

But yesterday, asked if Yurchenko had given his CIA debriefers useful information when he first defected, Reagan said in the interview, "Well, actually, the information that he provided was not anything new or sensational. It was pretty much information already known to the CIA."

A senior White House official, speaking on condition that he not be identified, amplified on these remarks at a press conference later. "The CIA thought they had a peach of a guy," he said. "The CIA was telling us how great [Yurchenko] was." However, he said there is no evidence Yurchenko actually provided valuable information.

The official also said there is no concrete evidence that the defectors were part of a Kremlin ploy. Rather, he said, "it's just a suspicion. . . . We suspect we were duped. But there's no way of telling."

There is widespread belief in the White House, the official said, that the CIA does not deal well with defectors, especially with psychological problems that they may be experiencing.

(Walter V. Robinson of the Globe's Washington bureau contributed to this report.)